



Mebane Rash

XDS, Inc.: One Provider's Adjustments to the State's Changes in Policy

by Mebane Rash

The story of XDS is a story about providers of mental health services and how they cope with the seemingly constant changes in state policy, how to pay for services, and the real impact on consumers and providers.

Thava Mahadevan (above) is the executive director of XDS in Pittsboro, a nonprofit provider of services to more than 130 consumers. XDS stands for “cross disability services,” which means the people Thava serves have both mental illness and developmental disabilities. Consumers with dual diagnoses routinely fall through the cracks because they need long-term care that costs a lot of money, and they are not going to get better. The budget for XDS is \$2 million.

Thava is a refugee from the island of Sri Lanka in southeast Asia. Ethnic and political conflict has plagued the island, and Thava’s family fled to Southern India after their home was attacked and burned to the ground. With the help of a Hindu monastery, the family began to rebuild their lives. After graduating from Madras Christian College, Thava received a full scholarship to attend Davidson College in 1988 on a music and cultural exchange. After Davidson, he moved to Boone. He worked for a small mental health agency providing direct care at two group homes to the first group of *Thomas S.* patients leaving Broughton Hospital. *Thomas S.* was a lawsuit on behalf of people with mental retardation that had been served in state psychiatric hospitals instead of their communities. Thava says he loved his work there, and so he decided to go to graduate school at UNC-Chapel Hill in rehabilitation counseling. He then went to work at John Umstead Hospital in Butner, as the *Thomas S.* specialist, transitioning patients back to their home counties. Five years later, he became the *Thomas S.* coordinator for the Orange-Person-Chatham local mental health management entity.

After the mental health reform law passed in 2001, XDS was established, and Thava has been there ever since.

Thava's laugh is infectious. His energy and passion fill the room. He has figured out how to roll with the system. He has decided that serving his clients is all that matters. He figures out what is best for them, and then he figures out how to make that happen.

XDS rents 60 apartments in the Triangle for its clients. Thava knows that without housing he can't keep his clients out of crisis. His clients use a federal government subsidy to pay for rent and food stamps to pay for food. But how were they supposed to pay for utilities? Thava went to the N.C. Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services, and he made sure that their coverage would include the other costs of independent living so his clients could live on their own in the community in an apartment of *their* choice.



When his clients missed appointments over and over again because of transportation issues, Thava bought a fleet of cars for XDS. Now XDS is able to take services to its clients. Even the psychiatrist goes to the homes of those she treats and provides her services there.

To monitor all of the constant changes in billing and coverage, Thava set up a war room. On one screen, he monitors incoming money to provide services. On another screen, he monitors the Division's almost constant communications with providers. He pays bills at the same time with his handheld device. There is a notebook computer on his desk that does everything else. He takes it with him everywhere.

Thava lost hope in 2011 when the state's shift to Critical Access Behavioral Health Agencies (called CABHAs, these are large providers of mental health and substance abuse services) was announced. He stopped laughing, and for the first time he worried about his clients and his staff and whether he could figure out this latest obstacle. He knew the numbers didn't work. Unwilling to shut down, he moved XDS from Durham, where he was paying \$8,000 in rent, and bought property in Pittsboro that costs him only \$2,500 a month. XDS then was approved as a CABHA. Thava had figured out a way to keep XDS going.

XDS has merged now with the UNC Center for Excellence in Community Mental Health so that together they can provide a true continuum of care for consumers — from hospital emergency room services, to inpatient hospital beds, to mobile crisis teams, to high-level services needed to keep clients living in the community and out of hospitals, to community support. Thava remains the executive director of XDS, and he serves as the Director of Operations for the Center for Excellence.

Thava now wants to establish a clinic on the XDS property so that medical and behavioral services are integrated, at least for his clients. He wants to create a therapeutic farm on his 35 acres and build a music, art, and pottery therapy center for his consumers.

Thava wants mental health reform to work. The alternative, he says, is unthinkable — for his clients, for his organizations, for his state. ☒☒

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